



A Brief History of St Albans and the Mayoralty

History of St Albans

Some of you may know that the area now known as The City and District of St Albans was originally occupied by an Iron Age tribe known as the Catuvellauni. Their capital was at Wheathampstead where it is suggested they were defeated under their leader Cassivellaunus by the Romans led by Julius Caesar in 54 BC. Within about 100 years, they had moved to the area which was to become Verulamium, the third largest Roman town in Britain. St Albans/Verulamium was located a day's march from London (later a half day's coach ride) so was an essential stopping point for travel to the north along Watling Street (A5).

Alban, a Roman/British official who had converted to Christianity, was probably martyred in approx 250 AD. The site of his burial became a place of pilgrimage and was visited by Germanus of Auxerre in AD 429. He came to Britain at the request of Pope St. Celestine I. Later, a monastery was founded by Offa and dedicated to St Alban in AD 793 under its first Abbot Willegod. Subsequently, the Abbey was re-founded after the Norman Conquest by Paul de Caen, who had been appointed 14th Abbot of St Albans in 1077, and had the monastic church rebuilt according to the contemporary style. Robert the Mason was employed to build the new Abbey to dwarf, in size and magnificence, the earlier Saxon abbey. At the time it was the most contemporary Abbey in England. Therefore it was Paul de Caen (Caen is a town in Normandy – France) who established St Albans as a centre of learning for much of the medieval period. Robert's work still survives in the crossing and tower, with its re-used Roman and some Saxon material. This explains where much of the Roman city walls went to! The Abbey was consecrated, although not necessarily finished, on [Holy Innocent's Day](#) in 28 December 1115, by the [Archbishop of Rouen](#), with King [Henry I](#) and Queen Matilda, as well as other dignitaries in attendance. Building work continued almost until the Dissolution in 1539. Ironically, our only British Pope (Pope Adrian IV 1154) tried to be accepted as a monk of the Abbey but was turned down.

The Abbey was run by the Benedictine Order and, in 1154, it was said to have been the premier Abbey in the whole of England. The Abbey had a large number of highly qualified monks which is probably why the first draft of the Magna Carta was written here in 1213. King John was forced to agree to the "Articles of the Barons" on 15 June 1215 to which his [Great Seal](#) was attached. A formal document to record the agreement was created by the royal [decree](#) on 15 July. This was the original Magna Carta; subsequently there have been revisions and additions.

Over the years the local population of St Albans became increasingly annoyed with the Abbey and its Abbot as they ran the market and the corn mills and other monopolies and charged high fees. There were regular quarrels including the Peasants Revolt in 1381.

St Albans residents were not unique in being unhappy with Abbots and Monasteries but little could be done as they were so powerful. However, for various reasons, King Henry VIII was also infuriated by the Pope who was the principal of all the Abbots. In the end it was the King who forced the Monasteries to close, under the Acts of Suppression of 1536 and 1539, in what became known as '*The Dissolution of the Monasteries*'. Henry took away all the land and the valuables for himself, his friends and supporters. St Albans Abbey was surrendered on [December 5, 1539](#); its income at the time was £2,100 annually. The Abbot and the remaining forty monks were pensioned off. Much of the monastic land and buildings were bought by Richard Lee who used them to build 'Lee Hall', on the site of Sopwell Nunnery.

The Clock Tower was constructed between 1403 and 1405 and is the only surviving medieval example in the country. The Clock Tower seems to have been intended as a visible statement of St. Albans' civic ambitions against the power of the Abbot. From the beginning it contained a mechanical clock (a great rarity at that time) probably because the Abbey also had one. The tower was used as a look out and its bell as a curfew, ringing out the times when people had to be indoors "covering the fire". From 1808-1814 during the Napoleonic war, the Clock Tower was utilised by the Admiralty as a semaphore station; the semaphore being placed on top. This was operated by a shutter system and could help relay a message to or from Yarmouth in 5 minutes. By the 1860's the Tower was in a bad way and was nearly demolished, but in 1864 underwent restoration by Sir Gilbert Scott. In 2004, the roof was rebuilt for improved public safety and access.

There was now (1539) nobody officially in charge of the town, so in due course the citizens petitioned the King, now Edward VI (aged 10), for a Royal Charter seeking the necessary powers to run the town and its market. The King granted a Royal Charter on 12th May 1553 (The original document is held in the County Archives in Hertford). St Albans was fortunate to "get in early" as the young King died on 6th July 1553 and other towns that had a similar problem but were slower off the mark had a long wait.

As part of the Charter, St Albans was given the Right to hold Wednesday and Saturday markets and still holds those Markets today, over 400 years later. The right to hold a market was important because it established the town as the centre of commerce in the area and therefore ensured that your town grew and prospered.

This is the point when the Mayoralty of St Albans really started as it was this Charter that first established both Local Government and the right and indeed obligation to have a Mayor to be elected each year.

We have had Mayors for over 450 years since the first Charter in 1553. The first Mayor was a man called John Lockey. Some Mayors have served for less than a year for a variety of reasons such as changes in local government arrangements, the outbreak of war or if they died in office. Others Mayors have served twice or even for three successive years as one mid-Victorian Mayor managed to do

The Charter also appointed 10 other men (Principal Burgesses) to assist the Mayor in running the City. The Mayor had both Executive and Judicial Roles. They were not elected democratically but were nominated for life by friends and contacts of the other existing Burgesses. The executive structure is similar to the situation today where we have an Executive Cabinet of 8 Senior Members, although the Cabinet and indeed all 58 Councillors are elected for 4 year terms. The Mayor's role is no longer Executive or Legal. It is ceremonial and is to represent the City and District Council locally, nationally and indeed internationally at important events.

The Mayor has a Chain of Office and on formal occasions wears a red gown and black tricorne hat; when wearing these is preceded and protected by a Mace Bearer carrying a silver-gilt mace, who historically walked 3 paces in front of the Mayor to protect him. This has indeed been needed in living memory to protect the Mayor from an aggressive protester during the Poll Tax period under Maggie Thatcher's period as Prime Minister. The current mace was made in 1660 by John Maundy, Silversmith to Charles II. Around the bowl is the St Albans Coat of Arms, the Rose of England, Harp of Ireland, Thistle of Scotland and the Fleur de Lys of France (English monarchs would claim to rule France until the reign of George III). The current Chain was presented to the City around 1885 by Mr Monkton White who was the Mayor at that time. The names of all Mayors since that date are inscribed on the small shields you can see on the Main Chain.

Wars of Roses The Wars of the Roses were fought between the supporters of the House of Lancaster, represented by the unstable King Henry VI, and those of the rival House of York, headed by [Richard of York](#), who was respected for his statesmanship and believed by many to have a better claim to the throne.

The **First Battle of St Albans** was the first battle of the [Wars of the Roses](#) and was fought on [22 May 1455](#) in the town. [Richard, Duke of York](#) and his ally, [Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick](#), defeated the [Lancastrians](#) under [Edmund, Duke of Somerset](#), who was killed. York also captured [Henry VI](#) and had himself appointed [Constable of England](#). The Lancastrian army of 2,500 troops arrived at [St Albans](#) first, and proceeded to defend it by placing troops along the Tonman Ditch and at the bars (gates) in Sopwell Lane and Shropshire Lane. The 3,000 strong [Yorkist](#) army arrived and camped in Keyfield to the east. Lengthy negotiations ensued with heralds moving back and forth between the rival commanders. After several hours, Richard, despairing of a peaceful solution, decided to attack. The bulk of Henry's forces were surprised by the speed of Richard's attack; most of the army was expecting a peaceful resolution similar to the one at [Blackheath](#) in [1452](#). However, two frontal assaults down the narrow streets against the barricades made no headway and resulted in heavy casualties for the Yorkists. Warwick took his reserve troops through an unguarded part of the town's defences, through back lanes and gardens. Suddenly the Earl appeared in the Market Square where the main body of Henry's troops were talking and resting. Warwick charged instantly with his force, routing the Lancastrians and killing the Duke of Somerset. The Earl then ordered his archers to shoot at the men around the King, killing several and injuring the King and the [Duke of Buckingham](#). The Lancastrians manning the barricades realised the Yorkists had outflanked them, and fearing an attack from behind abandoned their positions and fled the town. The First Battle of St Albans was relatively minor in military terms, but politically was a complete victory for York: he had captured the King and returned himself to complete power; his rival Somerset was dead; and Warwick's arch-enemies [Henry Percy, 2nd Earl of Northumberland](#) and [Lord de Clifford](#) both fell during the rout.

The **Second Battle of St Albans** was fought on 12 February, 1461. The army of the [Yorkist](#) faction under the [Earl of Warwick](#) attempted to bar the road to London north of the town. The rival [Lancastrian](#) army used a wide outflanking manoeuvre to take Warwick by surprise, cut him off from London, and drive his army from the field. The victors also released [King Henry](#), who had been Warwick's prisoner, from his captivity. In summary, the Yorkist army under the Earl of Warwick attempted to block the road to London at St Albans. Having won the town, the Lancastrians turned north towards Bernard's Heath and Montagu's Rear Battle. The Rear battle, attempting to reinforce the defenders of the town, was engaged and scattered. By late afternoon, the Lancastrians were attacking north-east out of St Albans towards the remaining Yorkist forces, and by the early evening Warwick realised that his men were outnumbered, and retreated. At the Second Battle of St Albans, the battle did see the capture yet again of King Henry VI, who is supposed to have spent the battle sitting under a tree, singing, the subsequent eventual disintegration of the Lancastrian army, and within weeks led to the coronation of Edward IV on March 4th 1461.

During the English Civil War (1642) the King's army was at one end of the town, and the Parliamentarians were at the other end of town. The Mayor and his Council were trapped in the Town Hall in the middle. The Council and the Mayor sat all day trying to decide which side they should support. In the end they decided to back both sides and had two scrolls of welcome made. One welcoming the "victorious army of Cromwell (he was the leader of the Parliamentarians) to St Albans", another "welcoming the triumphant army of King Charles 1st to St Albans".

When the battle was over, the Mayor was dispatched to present the appropriate scroll to the victors. He put a scroll in each pocket in his sleeves BUT unfortunately he got it wrong and presented the wrong scroll! For this gross act of incompetence he was flung into jail!

Although St Albans was a very important town with its Abbey it was not a City. The Abbey had been allowed to fall into considerable disrepair which was resolved in the opinion of some unsatisfactorily by Lord Grimshaw. After the renovation in 1877 on the order of Queen Victoria the Abbey officially became a Cathedral, the town became a City and the title “the Right Worshipful” was added to the original simple title of “The Mayor” which made the Mayor of St Albans the most senior Mayor in Hertfordshire.

The Mayor, for the duration of the Mayoralty, is the Queen’s representative and is the senior citizen of The City and District of St Albans and takes precedence over anybody and everybody else with the only exception being the Lord Lieutenant (The Queen’s representative for the whole county).

By an act of Parliament (1973) Harpenden and the present Parishes were merged with St Albans which is when the name changed to the City and District.

The Coat of Arms of St Albans consists of the yellow cross on a blue background which is the Coat of arms of the former Abbots of the Abbey. Incidentally, this type of simple crest is one of the oldest in heraldry, because it is just one simple coloured cross. There is a knight in armour at the top of the crest, holding a scroll, which represents the barons who forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. Two figures stand either side of the shield representing two main facets of the town; the Abbot in clerical dress representing the Abbey and John the Printer dressed in costume of the time signifying the early printing industry in St Albans. The first book was printed here in 1480. The Abbot stands on a ploughed field to reflect the importance of agriculture in this area and the printer on cobbles to indicate that this is a mediaeval town.

The Mayor ceased to be a Justice of the Peace (or Magistrate) but prior to this the Mayor had presided over the bench for the Borough in the Court Room in the “Old” Town Hall in Market Place, at the Head of St Peter’s Street.

Currently the Mayor is nominated by each political group based on a somewhat complex mathematical formula that over a short period of years ensures that each political party has its correct share of the honour to nominate the man or woman for the position also for the Deputy Mayor.

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mayoralty@stalbens.gov.uk

01727 819544